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# U.S. reconnaissance office: Most secret and expensive spy agency

## Are spy satellites watching you?

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Washington, D.C.

Did you take part in a ghetto insurrection during the late 1960s? Did you march in an antiwar demonstration?

If so, the most expensive and most secret U.S. intelligence agency may have been watching you from 100 miles up in space.

That agency, the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO), operates this country's network of spy satellites and is so hush-hush that even its existence is officially classified. As one CIA official has said, "We can't even discuss the name."

Behind the wall of secrecy lies a history which includes illegal use of satellites for domestic spying purposes, according to documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act by the Center for National Security Studies (CNSS), a liberal research group monitoring U.S. intelligence activities. Thus at a time when President Ronald Reagan is planning to lift the limited restrictions imposed on the FBI and CIA, the potential is high for also expanding the spy role of the NRO—without anyone even knowing it.

Although the NRO itself is little known, the U.S. satellite reconnaissance program has been one of Washington's worst-kept secrets for years. It was only in 1979—as part of President Jimmy Carter's campaign for ratification of the Salt 2 treaty—that the government officially acknowledged that satellites are used to gather military intelligence. Carter tactfully referred to the program as "national means of verification" by which the U.S. could monitor Soviet compliance with arms limitation agreements.

Carter didn't mention, however, the bureaucratic unit directing the program—the NRO. Established in 1961 when satellite photographs first began to replace those obtained from spy planes like the U-2, the NRO is a joint Air Force/CIA operation. Its budget of over \$2 billion—twice that of the CIA—is hidden in the Air Force's appropriations and its director is nominally a high official of that military branch.

NRO's job is to oversee the development of satellite technology and operate the devices when they are in space. The agency forwards photographs, or "imagery" in intelligence terminology, to the CIA for

analysis. Satellites also intercept other countries' electronic communications which are interpreted by the National Security Agency (NSA). The CIA and NSA select reconnaissance targets.

"[Satellites] are considered the most valuable intelligence asset," said Jay Peterzell, a CNSS research associate. According to Peterzell, it is a myth that most military secrets come from the romantic espionage agent stealing documents and blackmailing officials. More than "80% of [U.S.] intelligence comes from technical means," he commented.

### SPY IN THE SKY

NRO's satellites have done more than collect foreign military intelligence. CIA documents obtained by the Center in 1979 reveal that photographs of uprisings in U.S. cities and antiwar protest were taken from outer space.

The key memorandum, dated May 8, 1973 and entitled "Activities Possibly Outside CIA's Legislative Charter," is a report to then CIA director James R. Schlesinger on potentially embarrassing agency activities. It refers to CIA "review [of] satellite imagery . . . to identify photography too 'sensitive' for public release" and "domestic coverage for special purposes such as . . . civil disturbances." The CIA is supposed to refrain from domestic spying.

U.S. spy satellites are so accurate that, reportedly, they can read license plates or tell whether a man has shaved. It is unclear, however, whether the purpose of the satellite monitoring program was to identify individuals or estimate the size and extent of mass actions.

Critics of the U.S. intelligence community contend that NRO uses its top secret status to conceal abuses like domestic spying. The CNSS's Peterzell also argues that the main reason for keeping a program known to the world top secret is to protect the NRO's budget from scrutiny.

NRO's cost overruns are mammoth—even by Pentagon standards—reaching four and five times projected totals, according to some reports. NRO's extreme secrecy prevents Congress from exercising even the minimal budgetary oversight that other intelligence agencies are subject to. One congressional veteran of close to two decades even admitted recently that he had never heard of the reconnaissance office.

But while the U.S. public has not heard much of the NRO, rest assured that this multibillion-dollar agency is keeping close tabs on the public, particularly the people